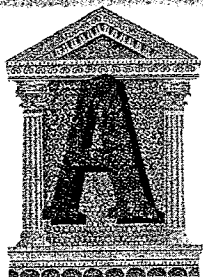


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# 1 The Ancient Greek City-States



**Great Civilization** Many people believe that the greatest of all the civilizations of the ancient world was the civilization of Greece. In a sense, though, it is a little misleading to speak about ancient Greece as if it were a single civilization.

Ancient Greece was not a unified country but a collection of independent **city-states**. The ancient Greek word for city-state was *polis* (POH lih). A typical polis would have included a town or a small city as well as the farmlands surrounding it. Most Greek city-states had a population of no more than 20,000 and covered an area of only a hundred or so square miles.

By 500 B.C. dozens of these city-states had grown up, mainly along the shores of the Aegean Sea. Most were located in modern-day Greece, but others were scattered along the coast of **Asia Minor**, on the shores of the Black Sea, in southern Italy, and in northern Africa.

The Greek city-states had a number of things in common. First, the people of the city-states all spoke Greek, though dialects varied from city-state to city-state. (A dialect is a regional variety of a language.) The Greeks referred to non-Greek speakers as "barbarians." When

these people spoke, the Greeks could hear only meaningless syllables that sounded to them like *bar, bar, bar*.

The Greek city-states were also unified by religion. The citizens of the various city-states worshiped the same set of Greek gods. Zeus (zyoos) was the chief god, but he shared

power with other gods, including his wife Hera (HIHR uh), the sun god Apollo (uh PAHL oh), the sea god Poseidon (poh SYE dun), and the love goddess Aphrodite (af ruh DYT ee). The Greeks believed that these gods lived on Mount Olympus but came down from time to time to influence human affairs. They told marvelous mythological stories about the

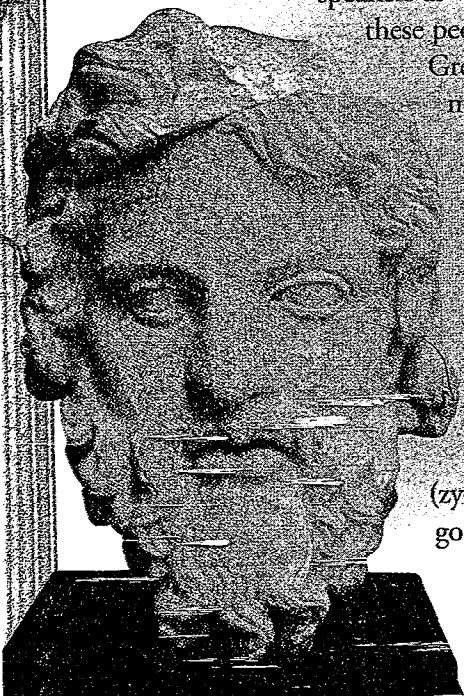
adventures and misadventures of their gods. They built temples to honor their gods. Greek city-states also came together for athletic competitions like the Olympic Games, which you will read about in Lesson 4.

But each Greek city-state was also unique. Each had its own traditions, legends, and local heroes. Almost all city-states worshiped a handful of local gods along with the central gods.

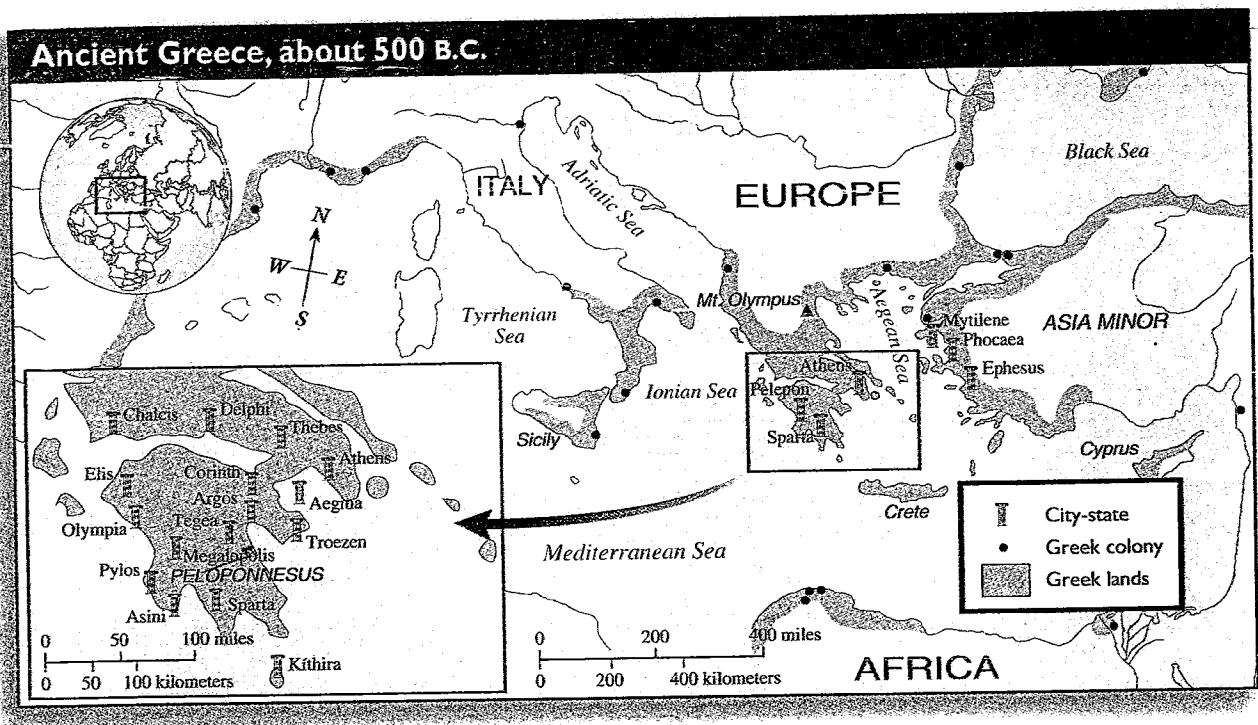
Each city-state also had its own distinctive forms of government. In fact, the Greeks were so innovative when it came to government and politics that many of the words we use to talk about these subjects today can be traced back to ancient Greek words. Our words *politics* and *policeman* are both derived from the word *polis*. Politics is the art of governing a polis, or state, and a policeman is a person who helps preserve order in the state.

## vocabulary

**city-state** an independent town or city that governs itself and the land around it  
**Asia Minor** another name for the Anatolian Peninsula, where much of Turkey is located



According to Greek belief, Zeus was the ruler of Mount Olympus and the king of gods.



*The Greeks established colonies throughout the Mediterranean.*

In the beginning most Greek city-states were ruled by kings. However, by 500 B.C. most city-states had adopted other forms of government, including tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy (ah-luh-gee), and democracy.

Tyranny was a system where one man was the dictator. For Greeks, tyranny was different from monarchy: tyrants seized power illegally, whereas kings inherited their throne legally. Some tyrants were popular because they opposed the rich and helped the poor. However, few Greeks wanted to live under tyrants all the time.

Aristocracy was a system in which a few noble or upper-class families held power. The word *aristocracy* actually means "rule of the best." Sometimes these "best" families shared power with an assembly made up of citizens, but not always.

An oligarchy was similar to aristocracy. Again, the power was held by only a few people. In fact, *oligarchy* means "rule of the few." But in this case the few were not noble families but wealthy men.

Finally, there was *democracy*. In a democracy, power was shared by a large number of citizens. Citizens took part in debates, decided government policy, and elected officials. The Greeks

seem to have been the first people to experiment with this kind of government. The experiment eventually caught on, and democracy became the pattern of government in a number of Greek city-states.

### **Lack of Unity**

The Greeks were proud of the independence and individuality of their city-states. They thought it was better to live under local government than under the power of a king who lived far away. However, there were also disadvantages to the city-state model. The Greek city-states were always getting into disagreements and wars, and this lack of unity made it easier for foreign countries to invade Greece. In times of crisis the city-states might join together to fight a common foe, but this was the exception, not the rule. In general, the alliances among city-states tended to be fragile and short-lived, while the rivalries among them tended to be sturdy and long-lasting.

One of the greatest rivalries was the one between Athens and Sparta. Athens and Sparta were two of the largest and most powerful of the city-states. In the next two lessons, you will learn about these two city-states and the differences between them.